

## Pakistan

Under pressure from the military leadership, the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif ceded significant constitutional and decision-making authority to the armed forces in 2015, particularly in the areas of national security, foreign policy, and human rights.

Parliament passed a constitutional amendment allowing secret military courts to try terrorism suspects. The military assumed control of the implementation of a national plan to address terrorism, largely without civilian oversight. It was also formally given membership in the Apex committees, provincial committees formed to coordinate local counterterrorism efforts and security.

The military muzzled dissenting and critical voices in nongovernmental organizations and media. The Rangers, a paramilitary force, were given complete control over law enforcement in the city of Karachi, where there were reports of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and torture. The military continued to exercise sway over the province of Balochistan, using torture and arbitrary detention as instruments of coercion.

In December 2014, the Islamist armed group Pakistani Taliban, Tehreek-e-Taliban, attacked a school in Peshawar in northwestern Pakistan, leaving 148 dead, almost all of them children. The government responded with a national action plan to fight terrorism, including tactics that violated basic rights. Authorities established the use of military instead of civilian courts in terrorism cases.

The government ended an unofficial moratorium on judicial executions; the death penalty was carried out 296 times in 2015 at time of writing. Abuses by the security forces led thousands of Afghans living in Pakistan to return to Afghanistan or flee elsewhere. Parliament passed vague and overbroad counterterrorism legislation. The government belatedly acknowledged the need to regulate madrassahs (Islamic schools) and disband

armed militias operating in the country, but took few steps to do so. The government officially recognized the need to curb incitement to violence and terrorism financing.

Religious minorities faced violent attacks, insecurity, and persecution, largely from Sunni extremist groups—which the government failed to address. The government continued to use blasphemy laws to institutionalize discrimination against religious minorities. The security forces engaged in extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances to counter political unrest in the province of Balochistan and in the port city of Karachi in Sindh province. Torture of suspects by the police remained rampant. Large numbers of journalists were killed or injured in attacks, most of which remain unresolved.

### **Counterterrorism and Law Enforcement Abuses**

Suicide bombings, armed attacks, and killings by the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and their affiliates targeted nearly every sector of Pakistani society, including religious minorities and journalists, resulting in hundreds of deaths. In connection with these attacks, military courts sentenced at least 15 people to death in proceedings shrouded in secrecy, giving rise to fair trial concerns. Neither the Pakistani government nor the military articulated any criteria for selection of cases to be tried in military courts, giving the impression of arbitrariness. No independent monitoring of the process was allowed, and the news of death sentences was often given by the Interservices Public Relations, a military communications agency, through social media.

### **Attacks on Minorities and Sectarian Violence**

The government failed to take adequate steps to prevent and respond to deadly attacks on Shia and other religious minorities in 2015. In January, at least 53 people were killed in a bomb blast at a Shia mosque in the city of Shikarpur in Sindh province. Jundullah, a splinter group of the Taliban that has pledged support for the armed extremist group Islamic State (also known as ISIS), claimed responsibility for the attack.

In February, 19 people were killed after Taliban militants stormed a Shia mosque in Peshawar. In March, suicide bombers belonging to Tehrik-i-Taliban targeted two churches in the Christian neighborhood of Youhana Abad in Lahore, killing 14. In May, an attack by Jundullah on members of the Ismaili Shia community in Karachi killed 43 people.

The attacks highlighted the threat armed extremist groups to pose to religious minorities, and the government's failure to apprehend or prosecute perpetrators.

## **Religious Minorities**

At least 19 people remained on death row after being convicted under Pakistan's draconian blasphemy law; hundreds awaited trial. The majority facing blasphemy charges were members of religious minorities, often victimized by these charges as a result of personal disputes.

In February, in a welcome move, Punjab's provincial judiciary drew up a shortlist of 50 cases of alleged blasphemy in which the accused was found to be "victimized" by inadequate evidence or lack of legal counsel. The provincial government committed to undertake the legal defense of these defendants—some of them suffering from intellectual or psychosocial disabilities—in special "fast track" trials.

In April, the Sindh provincial assembly enacted a law requiring the mandatory psychological examination of any person accused of blasphemy and allowing judicial discretion to reduce the sentences of those convicted of blasphemy whose medical evaluation produce a diagnosis of a "mental disorder."

## **Freedom of Expression**

Many journalists increasingly practiced self-censorship, fearing retribution from both state security forces and militant groups. Media outlets remained under pressure to avoid reporting on or criticizing human rights violations by the military in counterterrorism operations. The Taliban and other armed groups threatened media outlets and targeted journalists and activists for their work.

In April, Syed Wahidur Rahman, a journalism professor and former journalist, was gunned down in Karachi. Also in April, Sabeen Mahmud, a prominent Pakistani social and human rights activist, was shot dead shortly after hosting an event on Balochistan's "disappeared people" in Karachi. In June, Baloch journalist Zafarullah Jatak was gunned down in his home in Balochistan's capital, Quetta.

In September, in Karachi, Aftab Alam, a senior journalist, was gunned down near his home, while Arshad Ali Jaffery, a TV satellite engineer, was killed by three gunmen. Abdul Azam, a journalist, was wounded after being shot at in the northwestern city of Peshawar.

The National Assembly's Standing Committee on Information Technology and Telecommunication approved the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2015 in September. The bill included abusive provisions that allow the government to censor online content, criminalize Internet users, and permit the government to access metadata without any form of judicial review or privacy protection. YouTube, banned by the government since September 2012 for hosting "blasphemous content," remained blocked in 2015.

The Pakistan government forced the international aid agency Save the Children to suspend operations in June and banned the Norwegian Refugee Council. Independent organizations faced increasing pressure and harassment from the government.

The Pakistani government announced the "Policy for Regulation of INGOs in Pakistan" on October 1, 2015. The new regulations require all INGOs to register and obtain prior permission from the Ministry of Interior to carry out any activities in the country and to restrict their operations to specific issues and geographical areas. The ministry is broadly empowered to cancel registrations on grounds of "involvement in any activity inconsistent with Pakistan's national interests, or contrary to Government policy"—terms that have vague meanings and can be used for political reasons to target critical organizations or individuals.

## **Balochistan**

The security forces continued to unlawfully kill and forcibly disappear suspected Baloch militants and opposition activists in 2015. In January, 13 highly decomposed bodies of ethnic Baloch individuals were found in Khuzdar district. Baloch nationalists and other militant groups also stepped up attacks on non-Baloch civilians. In April, suspected Baloch militants gunned down 20 laborers in Turbat's Gogdan area. In May, 35 people were forced off a bus and kidnapped by members of a militant Baloch nationalist group, the United Baloch Army; 23 of the passengers were killed.

## **Afghans in Pakistan**

The Pakistani government failed to protect Afghans in the country against police extortion, theft, and general harassment in 2015. As a result of threats from local government officials, particularly after the December 2014 Peshawar school attack, increasing numbers of Afghans returned to their country. According to the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), over 50,000 refugees were repatriated to Afghanistan, most of whom had resided in Pakistan for more than 15 years. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted, and Human Rights Watch research found, that many returnees left because of police coercion and abuse and stated that returning to Afghanistan was their only viable option.

## **Attacks on Health Workers**

Taliban and other religious militant groups carried out violent attacks on healthcare workers, mostly women, involved in providing grassroots services. In March, two women health workers and a police guard were killed in Mansehra district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. In May, unidentified militants opened fire on a clinic in Karachi, killing a Shia doctor.

Militants targeted medical providers involved in polio immunization. In February, members of a polio vaccination team were attacked in southwest Pakistan and in Swat. In March, a polio vaccination team was attacked in Bajaur Agency, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

## **Women and Girls**

The government took inadequate action to protect women and girls from abuses including rape, murder through so-called honor killings, acid attacks, domestic violence, and forced marriages. According to local groups, hundreds of honor killings took place. In March, Punjab province passed a law setting tougher penalties for those who arrange or conduct child marriages. The law did not, however, raise the age of marriage from 16 to 18, in line with international standards, as Sindh did in 2014. The government's Council of Islamic Ideology denounced the Punjab reform. The government failed to address the issue of forced conversion to Islam of Hindu and Christian women.

Women were denied the right of vote in various parts of the country. In May, during a parliamentary by-election in Lower Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, none of the eligible 50,000 women in the constituency voted after warnings reportedly broadcast on mosque loudspeakers. Polling stations were guarded by “baton-wielding men,” according to news reports, who blocked the few women who attempted to vote.

## **Children’s Rights**

The Pakistani government failed to pass the promised legislation constituting the National Commission on the Rights of the Child, an independent body to protect and enforce child rights in the country. Attacks on schools and the use of child suicide bombers by the Taliban and affiliated armed extremist groups continued.

Rampant sexual abuse of children was exposed in August, when police uncovered a child pornography racket by a criminal gang that had produced and sold more than 400 videos of girls and boys being sexually abused in Kasur, Punjab. These videos had been filmed over a span of 10 years, affecting 280 child victims.

## **Death Penalty**

The Pakistani government had carried out the death sentences of at least 295 people in 2015 at time of writing. After the December 2014 attack on the school in Peshawar, the Pakistani government first moved to rescind a four-year unofficial moratorium on the death penalty for non-military personnel “in terrorism-related cases.” In early March, the government lifted the death penalty moratorium for all capital crimes, including kidnapping and murder. At the end of the year, an estimated 8,300 prisoners remained on death row, one of the world’s largest populations of prisoners facing execution. Pakistani law mandates capital punishment for 28 offenses, including murder, rape, treason, and blasphemy. Those on death row are often from the most marginalized sections of society.

Pakistani law forbids the use of the death penalty against children. However, in June, Aftab Bahadur, who was allegedly 15 at the time of his alleged offense, was executed. In August, Shafqat Hussain, who was allegedly 14 or 15 years old at the time of his alleged crime, and whose conviction was based on a confession allegedly obtained through torture, was hanged in a Karachi prison.

## **Key International Actors**

After years of disagreement and mistrust, relations with the United States, Pakistan's largest development and military donor, gradually improved. In March, US Secretary of State John Kerry praised the Pakistani military's operation against militants in the country's northwest, saying the results were "significant," but cautioned that more needed to be done. The US failed to exert any pressure on Pakistan to roll back abusive counterterrorism laws and restrain the injudicious use of death penalty. The US also did not press for a return to the primacy of the civilian government.

Pakistan and China deepened extensive economic and political ties. In April, Chinese President Xi Jinping made his first state visit to Pakistan. China and Pakistan signed agreements worth US\$28 billion during Xi's visit, related to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

The United Nations and the European Union expressed concern over the increasing use of the death penalty and urged the reinstatement of the moratorium. As of October, the UN estimated that the 8,300 people on death row included hundreds who were sentenced for offenses committed as children. In June, the UN high commissioner for human rights noted that Pakistan was the world's "third-most prolific executioner."

Historically tense relations between Pakistan and its nuclear rival India further deteriorated in 2015, with both countries accusing each other of facilitating unrest and militancy. Scheduled talks to resolve longstanding disputes over security, territory, and sharing river water resources were stalled.

Relations with Afghanistan, after displaying some initial signs of stabilizing, returned to hostility and mistrust. The Afghan government accused Pakistan of allowing the "Haqqani network", an affiliated group of the Taliban, to operate from Pakistan to carry out attacks in Afghanistan. Pakistan maintained that the network had been dismantled.